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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal, prospective study used case material from 232 families in its analysis of effects of family environments on criminal behavior. Men who had participated in a crime prevention program were studied 40 years after their families had first been visited by counselors. The men's convictions for serious crimes provided a measure of the long-term impact of childhood environments. Serious crimes were defined as crimes that appeared on the Federal Bureau of Investigation Type-1 Index. Records describing the families were coded in terms of parental alcoholism, family structure and conflict, esteem of each parent for the other, and parental supervision, discipline, warmth, and aggressiveness. Analyses of the data revealed that families of criminals differed from families of noncriminals in many ways. Criminal rates tended to be low when family climate had been good. Maternal competence and control appeared to reduce crime. Families deficient along one dimension tended to be deficient along others as well. Combined deficiencies appeared to be particularly criminogenic. (RH)

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ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

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Causal relationships between family functioning and child behaviour

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ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Joan McCord

Many of us know individuals who seem to have succeeded despite their families. Yet troublesome behavior appears to be a product of a set of events that can roughly be identified as parent-child relationships. Schizophrenia, for example, has been attributed to parents who create a "double bind"; alcoholism has been blamed upon "martyring" mothers; and aggression has been imputed to maternal overprotection. Although the particularities of causal theories tend to vary through time as well as from one form of troublesome behavior to another, the consistency with which problem families show up in the backgrounds of problem behaviors provides a justification for focusing on parent-child relationships in the attempt to understand antisocial behavior. The present study focuses on parent-child relationships as predictors of criminal behavior.

Method

Subjects for this study had been participants in a project designed as a treatment program to prevent delinquency. The boys, born between 1926 and 1933, typically received help between their tenth and sixteenth birthdays. All lived in congested, urban areas near Boston, Massachusetts. Counselors visited their homes about twice a month, over a period of more than five years, recording what they saw and heard (See Powers & Witmer, 1951). The

counselors' records provided data upon which to classify children and their families along many dimensions.

In 1957, records describing the families of those 253 boys who had remained in the program after an initial cut in 1941 were coded (See McCord & McCord, 1960). The codes included ratings of parental alcoholism, family structure and conflict, esteem of each parent for the other, parental supervision and disciplinary characteristics, parental warmth and aggressiveness. To estimate reliability of the coding, two raters independently read a 10% random sample of the cases. Agreement for these ratings ranged from 76% to 96%. (See Table 1.)

(Table 1 about here)

Criminal records had been searched in 1948, as part of treatment evaluation. Criminal records were searched again in 1975. Both sets of records showed, for each of the men who had appeared in court, the age of conviction as well as the charge. Subjects were considered to have committed crimes if they had been convicted for the serious crimes that appear on the Federal Bureau of Investigation Type-1 Index.

The 253 boys in the follow-up study included 21 boys whose brothers were also in the study. To avoid counting particular constellations of families more than once, only one child per family was used in analyses.

The coded records, uncontaminated by retrospective bias, contain the information about family life used in the present study.

Results

The families of criminals differed from families of non-criminals in many ways. (See Table 2.)

(Table 2 about here)

As compared with mothers of noncriminals, mothers of criminals were less likely to be self-confident (12% vs. 37%) or affectionate (31% vs. 55%), to provide consistent nonpunitive discipline (17% vs. 37%), or to attempt to restrict their son's activities (48% vs. 72%). Fathers of criminals were more likely to be alcoholics or to have records for convictions on index crimes (55% vs. 35%). The fathers of criminals were also less likely than fathers of noncriminals to be affectionate (14% vs. 31%) and to respect their wives (26% vs. 55%). Parents of the criminals were more likely than parents of the noncriminals to be aggressive (42% vs. 16%) and to be in conflict with one another (49% vs. 24%). The parents of criminals were also less likely to provide supervision for the boy (40% vs. 65%) or to hold high expectations for his conduct (13% vs. 31%). Each of these differences was statistically reliable, $\chi^2_{(1)}<.007$.

In order to understand the structure of differences among families, the variables describing families were subjected to cluster analysis (VARCLUS, SAS,1985). The procedure searches for orthogonal dimensions to describe the variations among families contained in the coded records. The cluster procedure identified three clusters of variables. One, composed of the mother's self-confidence, her attitude toward her child, and her discipline,

could be viewed as a measure of maternal competence. A second, composed of supervision, parental demands, and maternal control, represented parental control. And a third, composed of parental conflict, parental aggression, paternal deviance, absence of paternal affection for the boy or esteem for the mother, provided a measure of general family climate. Descriptive characteristics of the the cluster analysis appear in Table 3.

(Table 3 about here)

To stabilize and simplify the scales, each item in the three variables was given a score of one if present and zero otherwise. The maternal competence scale and the control scale ranged from zero to three; the family climate scale ranged from zero to five. A stepwise discriminant analysis indicated that the three scales together accounted for almost 19% of the variance in whether or not the son had been convicted for an index crime. In order of the proportion of explained variance, family climate came first, followed by maternal competence, and then control. (See Table 4.)

(Table 4 about here)

Maternal competence and control tended to be associated with the family climate. To illustrate the relationships, families were divided along the three dimensions: good (scores of 0 or 1), moderate (scores of 2 or 3), or bad family climate (scores of 4 or 5); competent mothers (scores of 2 or

3) or incompetent mothers (scores of 0 or 1); and high control (scores of 2 or 3) or low control (scores of 0 or 1).

As can be seen in Table 5, boys raised by families that had generally good climates tended also to have competent mothers; boys lacking competent mothers were more likely to be controlled if the family climate was good than if it was not.

(Table 5 about here)

Table 6 shows how the variations in families are related to criminal behavior among the sons.

(Table 6 about here)

Criminal rates tend to be low when the family climate has been good. And both maternal competence and control appear to reduce crime.

Summary

To analyze effects of family environments on criminal behavior, this longitudinal, prospective study has utilized case material from 232 families. Men who had been part of a crime prevention program were studied forty years after their families had first been visited. Their convictions for serious crimes provided a measure of the long-term impact of childhood environments.

The analyses show that families deficient along one dimension tend to be deficient along others as well. The combined deficiencies appear to be particularly criminogenic.

References

McCord, W. & McCord, J. (1960). Origins of alcoholism. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

Powers, E. & Witmer, H. (1951). An experiment in the prevention of delinquency: The Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Table 1

Family Variables

(Interrater Reliabilities for Dichotomous Variables)

	Percent Agreement
Maternal Affection	84
Paternal Affection	80
Maternal Aggressiveness	92
Paternal Aggressiveness	84
Maternal Restrictiveness	84
Maternal Consistency	84
Supervision	88
Parental Expectations	76
Parental Conflict	80
Fa's Esteem for Mother	72
Maternal Self-confidence	84
Paternal Alcoholism	96

Table 2

Family Background and Crime

(Percent of Families for which Description was Applicable)

Variable	Criminals (N=77)	Noncriminals (N=155)	p=
Transitional neighborhood	33	44	NS
Broken home (parent absent)	51	59	NS
Mother self-confident	12	37	.0001
Mother affectionate	31	55	.0005
Mother consistent	17	37	.0019
Mother restrictive	48	72	.0003
Paternal alcoholism/crime	55	35	.0041
Father affectionate	14	31	.0060
Father respects mother	26	55	.0001
Parental aggressiveness	42	16	.0001
Parental conflict	49	24	.0001
Boy supervised	40	65	.0003
High expectations for boy	13	31	.0029

Table 3

Cluster Analysis

Group Variable	R-square		Scoring
	Highest	Second	Coefficient
Maternal competence			
Mother's self-confidence	.517	.087	.431
Mother's affection	**.485**	**.084**	**.418**
Mother's consistency	.666	.104	.489
Family climate			
Father's esteem for mother	.596	.053	-.354
Parental conflict	.540	.049	.337
Paternal deviance	.321	.044	.260
Father's affection	.325	.058	-.261
Parental control			
Mother's restrictiveness	**.710**	**.079**	**.478**
Supervision	.692	.130	.472
Expectations for boy	.360	.088	.341

Table 4

Predicting Criminals

(Stepwise Discriminant Analyses)

Variable	Partial R-square	F	P>F	Mean Squared Canonical R
Family climate	.1291	34.08	.0001	.1291
Maternal competence	.0502	12.10	.0006	.1727
Parental control	.0183	4.26	.0402	.1879

Table 5

Family Characteristics

(Percent of Column)

Family climate	Good (N=84)	Moderate (N=89)	Bad (N=59)
Competent Mo; High control	41.7	14.6	13.6
Competent Mo; Low control	8.3	12.4	1.7
Incompetent Mo; High control	31.0	31.5	25.4
Incompetent Mo; Low control	19.1	41.6	59.3
	100.1*	100.1*	100.0

*Deviations from 100% are due to rounding.

$X^2_{(6)}=22.21$, $p<.01$

Table 6

Family Characteristics & Criminal Behavior

(Crime as Percent of Family Type)

Family climate	Good	Moderate	Bad
Competent Mo;			
High control	(N=35) 11.4	(N=13) 7.7	(N=8) 37.5
Competent Mo;			
Low control	(N=7) 14.3	(N=11) 18.2	(N=1) --
Incompetent Mo;			
High control	(N=26) 7.7	(N=28) 42.9	(N=15) 53.3
Incompetent Mo;			
Low control	(N=16) 37.5	(N=37) 40.5	(N=35) 62.9